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AESTRACT

Focusing on communicative competence as a major concept in speech communication, the author discusses the implications for theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical activities. Theoretical concerns generated by this focus are: characterization of the knowledge which comprises communicative competence, description of rules for appropriate communicative behavior, and communicative invariance. On the methodological level he emphasizes expansion of research procedures to include systematic observation of unstructured interactions and settings and reliance on data supplied by the intuitions of communicators. The pedagogical implications suggest a move toward interdepartmental study, greater student participation and involvement, the beginning of communication training at an earlier educational level (elementary), and the recognition that the primary objective should involve cognitive changes rather than behavioral changes. (Author/LG)

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COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD OF SPEECH COMMUNICATION

by

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The construct "communicative competence" first became meaningful to me in a men's room at the University of Iowa. I don't mean to suggest that a wayward scholar discoursed to me there about the theoretical and methodological possibilities of that construct. Nor is it the case that a student of Dell Hymes, the inventor of the construct, scratched a ribald jingle on the wall for future scholars to behold. (What would rhyme with "competence" after all?) Rather, I made an observation which suggested to me with some impact that certain non-linguistic behavioral phenomena might be rule-bound. My observation led me to formulate a grammar of lavatory behavior. Unfortunately, an acute sensitivity to communication norms and an almost morbid sense of decorum prohibit me from carrying this example any further. For more details about this admittedly oblique instance, see me after the formal session.

Another example from my anecdotal arsenal is less provocative, but it also produced a flash of conviction--an "aha" moment as one of my professors used to say. My wife and I were doing a crossword puzzle, we were puzzling over a blank, I suddenly recognized the correct answer, and I asked her, "Where's the pencil?." She had been holding it a few minutes earlier. Without a word, she pulled it out of her pocket and handed it to me. Now, her response was so appropriate that its remarkableness is easily missed. Why did she not say, "The pencil is in my pocket?" A machine might have responded in this way, but not a human being socialized in our culture. If she had responded with "in my pocket," I would have inferred that she was joking. If she had said "in my pocket" with perfect seriousness, I would have inferred that she or I had gone suddenly mad. The point is that a mechanically logical response would have violated something we both knew about appropriate communication in that context.

Normal communicators have a complex and subtle ability which allows them to communicate appropriately in many contexts. Communication works most of the time. This is a remarkable fact which is often ignored by communication theorists and researchers. At the most basic level, we understand and are understood more often than not, i.e., when we speak our listeners understand that we are saying even if they misunderstand or disagree with what we are saying.

I think you will realize that statements like these are deeply opposed to the major orientation of our field, an orientation that has characterized speech since its inception. Perhaps as a result of our historical roots as teachers of speech, i.e., teachers who help students to become more effective or more eloquent speakers, we have been primarily concerned with variations in speech. What makes this person a more effective persuader than that person? Why is she more intelligble than he? What variables explain these differences?

Our orientation was (and is) by no means peculiar. We received much support from the other behavioral sciences. Structural linguists, influenced by Bloomfield and Sapir, told us that differences in language between cultures are of primary importance. They suggested that the task of the linguist is to ferret out a culture and to construct a unique grammar of the language.[1] Whorf told us that differences in language produce radical differences in perception.[2] And where differences in perception exist, there will be "communication problems." Allport and other social psychologists said that attitude is a basic construct which can help to explain the variability of human responses to a single stimulus.[3] Fisher and other statistical theorists developed powerful tools for the analysis of variation and we used them.[4] Closer to home, Wendell Johnson and the General Semanticists argued that everything varies, constantly and eternally.[5] Meanings were said to be slippery because human communicators and the world about which they communicate change from epoch to epoch, from day to day, from moment to moment.

I am sure that with little difficulty one could discover nonscientific forces which supported the social scientific concern with variation. I am thinking of social forces like the development of rapid transportation systems which forced people from various countries and cultures to collide. Then, too, certain influential philosophies and literary movements might be implicated. Existential writers, Gide, Kafka, and Camus, for example, were obsessed with individual differences and the loneliness and bravery of people trapped in their private worlds. The deterministic philosophy of Marx and the neo-Marxists called attention to class differences and analyzed the influence of differing environments on human happiness. J. B. Watson, one of our earliest heroes, was certainly influenced by this philosophy. Remember his classic statement in Behaviorism?

> Whence come these differences in the machine? In the case of man, all healthy individuals . . . start out equal . . . . It is what happens to individuals after birth that makes one a hewer of wood and a drawer of water, another a diplomat, a thief, a successful business man or a farfamed scientist. What our advocates of freedom in 1776 took no account of is the fact that the Deity himself could not equalize 40-year-old individuals who have had such different environmental trainings as the American people have had.[6]

While the search for sources of variation was flaming the creative energies of important persons in Speech and the other behavioral sciences, an important psychologist--or "genetic epistomologist" as he prefers to be called--was actively pursuing a radically different goal. The goal of Jean Piaget was to make a description of the structures of the human mind. More specifically, Piaget was concerned with describing developmental changes in cognitive structures in the maturing human being. In his earliest book, The Language and Thought of the Child, published in 1926, Piaget reported research which purported to show some relatively invariant properties of speech behavior in children.[7] He made universal claims about the

ego centric nature of the young child's thought and language and the inevitable movement of the maturing child toward socialized speech.

Piaget's book was largely ignored outside of Europe until the 1950's when for reasons which are not mysterious but are certainly complex, American psychologists discovered it and began to use it has a basis for rigorous research. Jerome Bruner and Roger Brown are two names which come to mind. At this time, Noam Chomsky published his monumentally influential Syntactic Structures, which, as Professors Nofsinger and Sanders have suggested, provided a major impetus to the search for invariant features of language.[8] Eric Lenneberg was gathering materials for his Biological Foundations of Language, a book which attempted in a preliminary way to explore the very heart of language, namely, the species-specific neurological components which make language possible.[9] Other names could be mentioned here were there but convention enough and time.

Currently, the divergent searches for behavioral variance and invariance are both going strong in many of the social sciences. The two paradigms--structuralist and behaviorist--are existing side by side with only occasional if somewhat vicious spats.[10] And this is probably good. But, as I suggested earlier, researchers in Speech Communication have been extremely reluctant to undertake any work which might yield information about those types or forms of knowledge which all communicators have or those things which all communicators do. We have paid some small lip service to communicative invariance in an article here or there which mentions Chomsky or Lenneberg. But our research efforts and our teaching remain squarely in the behaviorist or neo-behaviorist camp. One may tease a few tortured implications from some of the studies of cross cultural communication, i.e., one may learn at least that a specific relationship varies across cultures or more positively that a relationship is invariant across cultures. Still, most of the cross cultural researchers are looking for differences, in keeping with the pre-Levi Straussian tradition in anthropology.

Well, what might change in our research and teaching if we become seriously interested in the topic of communicative invariance. Let me sketch a few possibilities. In our theoretical and research activities, we would attempt to answer some of the following questions:

(1) Is "communicative competence" a viable construct? Professor Sanders and Michael Schneider have dealt with this question at some length in their paper. It is certainly the most crucial question.

(2) How can the knowledge which comprises communicative competence be characterized? Can we describe rigorous rules for appropriate communicative behavior?

(3) What are the similarities and differences in communication knowledge that exist across cultures? That is, what varies and what does not? A related question is: Is there anything resembling a "surface structure" and a "deep structure" in communication? More generally, we might ask: How does communicative competence relate to communicative behavior?

(4) Does the development of communicative competence in children parallel the growth of cognitive and linguistic competence? That is, are there clear developmental stages in the growth of the child's knowledge of communication? If stages exist, how do they relate to motoric and perceptual maturational milestones?

(5) How is knowledge of communication acquired? Do parents, peers, and teachers teach it, consciously or unconsciously? Or do children just "pick it up" as a result of simple exposure? That is, do they induce a structure of communicative behavior as a result of being exposed to instances of communication? If so, what neurological mechanisms are directly implicated?

These questions have some methodological correlates. If we try to answer them, we will have to change some of our typical research procedures or at least change some of our procedural emphases. For one thing, observations of the communicative behavior of children and adults in various settings should take on a new importance. Systematic observations across settings may help to determine what varies and what does not. In the laboratory, we may want to make descriptions and analyses of relatively unstructured interaction. Some fascinating descriptive studies of communication have been done by Argyle, using videotaped interactions as a primary data source. Some regularities in the sequencing of verbal and nonverbal signals have been uncovered in this way. In his introduction to Social Interaction, a book in which some of the videotape studies are reported, Argyle calls for more detailed descriptions of communicative behavior and suggests that there has been an overreliance on experimental techniques.[11] This suggestion parallels some recent methodological directives of a few people in and out of our field: Theodore Clevenger,[12] David Smith,[13] and David Bakan,[14] for example.

Apart from the data obtained from observations and descriptions in the laboratory and in field settings, we may increasingly rely on data supplied by the intuitions of communicators, much as the transformational linguist uses intuitions of native speakers as a source of data about language. By asking people about their sense of the appropriateness and inappropriateness of communicative acts in specific contexts, we may be able to "map out" the knowledge of native communicators and then compare "maps" across cultures.

Certainly experimental studies will still have a place. The cognitive competence of children is being subjected to rigorous experimentation by Bruner and his associates. But this kind of experimentation is possible only because of the early descriptive explorations of Piaget, Inhelder, and others.

Our teaching will change in fairly obvious ways. We will increasingly encourage students to take courses in ethnomethodology, field methods, developmental psychology, transformational linguistics, psycho-and socio-linguistics, anthropology, and maybe biological and physiological psychology. We will increasingly offer courses in cross cultural communication, the acquisition of communicative behaviors, and field methods in communication research. In our classes, we may want to illustrate some regularities in knowledge by tapping student intuitions about appropriate and inappropriate communication. In short, data pertaining to communication may be obtained from the class itself as well as from the usual sources.

Finally, we may come to recognize that much of our communication training should be done in the elementary school. This would certainly reverse a traditional pattern. Perhaps the time to tamper with competence is when it is forming. This assumes, of course, that competence is largely formed by the time a student reaches college, which may or may not be the case. Also, our training may come to have as its primary objective changes in insight or knowledge--in short, cognitive changes--rather than behavioral ones. Skinnerian instructional methods may wain in importance if this happens.

In this paper I have suggested that as a field we have been almost exclusively interested in those things that vary among communicators and that it might be useful for us to begin looking at invariant aspects of communication. Some theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical correlates of this new perspective were discussed. Certainly there are many problems that have not been raised in this paper or in the previous ones, but hopefully the discussion will allow us to do so.

NOTES

1. See John Lyons, Noam Chomsky (New York, 1971), 25-34.
2. Benjamin L. Whorf, Language, Thought, and Reality (Cambridge, Mass. and New York, 1956).
3. Gordon W. Allport, "Attitudes." In C. Murchison (ed.), Handbook of Social Psychology (Worcester, Mass., 1935), 798-884.
4. Ronald A. Fisher, Statistical Methods for Research Workers (London, 1925).
5. Wendell Johnson, People in Quandaries (New York, 1946).
6. John B. Watson, Behaviorism (New York, 1930), p. 270.
7. Jean Piaget, The Language and Thought of the Child (Cleveland, Ohio, 1966).
8. Noam Chomsky, Syntactic Structures (The Hague, The Netherlands, 1957).
9. Eric H. Lenneberg, Biological Foundations of Language (New York, 1967).
10. Noam Chomsky, "A Review of Verbal Behavior, by B. F. Skinner," Language, 1959, 35, 26-58.
11. Michael Argyle, Social Interaction (New York, 1969), 13-24.
12. Theodore Clevenger, Jr., "Research Methodologies in Speech-Communication." In Robert J. Kibler and Larry L. Barker (eds.), Conceptual Frontiers in Speech-Communication (New York, 1969), 144-165.
13. David H. Smith, "Communication Research and the Idea of Process," Speech Monographs, August 1972, 39, 174-183.
14. David Bakan, On Method: Toward a Reconstruction of Psychological Investigation (San Francisco, 1967).